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THE NEW POOR AND THE OLD

BY JOHN CORBIN

WE hear much of "the new poor." The people to whom the name applies apparently rejoice in it. Their other name of middle class runs counter to one of our most tenderly cherished illusions, that in America there are no classes. It rubs painfully upon sensibilities that have been acute ever since Matthew Arnold psychologised the dullness of the middle-class mind and denounced the middle-class worship of a barren respectability. "New poor," exhibits one in a light that is dignified, martyrlike; the respectable temperament basks in it.

Of late, however, many of the middle class have ceased to be, in the Victorian sense, middle class. There are millions among our brainworking multitudes whom the epithet fills not with shame but with silent rage. The new poverty is a counter irritant so keen that they no longer feel galled by the old name. They even talk of a Middle-class Union. They have ceased to be class sensitive and have become class conscious. Yet if you ask them precisely what is this middle class which they champion—what are its rights and duties in relation to the other classes—they are inarticulate. They know that when a strike shuts down basic industries or ties up public utilities they have become strikebreakers, and will do so again. That is something; but on the long road which the class is destined to go it is only the first step. Not one white-collar man in ten thousand can visualize his class beyond that detail of the white collar. If any economist or publicist has charted its force lines, his light is beneath a bushel.

By far the best essay is this direction, which is no less excellent because it is the only one that has achieved publicity, is not an essay at all but fiction—unless indeed it is what it purports to be, autobiography. It is called *One Way Out: A Middle-Class New Englander Emigrates to*

America. It does not so much discuss the middle class as dramatize it, yet it is all the more suggestive and illuminating. Written from the point of view of the respectable brain worker, it is so far from championing his cause that it scorns and abominates the middle class and glorifies the life of the manual worker. Though it was published four years before the war, the war has only intensified its message and given it a new twist that must make the author, if he thinks clearly and to the finish, sit up and rub his eyes. Let us follow it in brief outline.

William Carleton was a clerk—a native American of Revolutionary stock and like most of his kind an instinctive individualist. Beginning at five dollars a week he rose till he received twenty-five. With every increase he found new needs, for in the best sense of the word he was ambitious. He dressed neatly and well, bought magazines and belonged to a book club. Not to do so was to fall beneath the standards of his kind. Neither he nor his neighbors saved. Present needs were too pressing. And what use had they for capital? At most they aspired to rise to a managerial position—and salary. When Carleton married, his pay was increased to thirty dollars and he took a small suburban cottage.

Marriage found him still a middle class individualist; but it enlarged his ego and refined it. Unpretentiously as the narrative unfolds, it reveals a picture of conjugal happiness full of sweetness and nobility, of normal intelligence and normal ambition. Mrs. Carleton did cooking and house-work, eagerly and happily. But she had a woman's need of her kind, and so they were led into expense for entertainment. There was a child, and both parents skimped to make him feel at ease with the children of the neighborhood—most of whose parents were similarly skimping. Hard as they both toiled, they gave the boy no work beyond his schooling, and "thought him doomed" if they should fail to send him through college and start him in business for himself. Both would have been glad of more children; but as things stood they were scarcely able to pay the bills. Then the heavens fell. Carleton's assistant was in love, and in order to marry offered to do the work of both for a single salary—a document in middle-class solidarity! So Carleton lost his job. He was now thirty-eight and the world of respectable

clerkdom was overcrowded. He could not find another position.

His attitude toward his neighbors in this crisis is full of the gall of bitterness. As well as Carleton could, he concealed his misfortune. He would not ask his friends for help—what had they to give? He could not even count upon their sympathy. The poor help the poor in misfortune and the rich the rich; but in the middle class they let the stricken deer go weep. In their hearts his neighbors would despise him for his failure, triumph over his fall from the world of respectables—though all knew inwardly that they themselves trembled above the same abyss.

The middle class as Carleton pictures it is a world of high personal virtues, high personal aspirations. With an added touch of social sympathy, of collective imagination and the spirit of a common cause, it would be a world of all that is ideal in citizenship. But, lacking this, it is a world of narrow individualists, of egoists whose only inspiration from without is in matters of external form. From such a combination only one thing can result—universal anguish of spirit. The chapter in which these things appear is called, most appropriately, *The Middle-Class Hell*.

And then the heavens opened. There was a man, Murphy, who did odd chores in the neighborhood and tended furnaces. Murphy, it appeared, had saved, and had invested his savings in a new slum tenement. And there was also the owner of a bootblackening emporium, Pasquale, who was even more prosperous. How had they got on? By being beautifully free from the standards of respectability. They were immigrants, as Carleton's forebears had been—or so it seemed to Carleton. Why should he not likewise "emigrate to America," and likewise prosper? He took a four-room flat in Murphy's tenement and went to digging in the subway. According to post-bellum standards his pay was incredibly small—nine dollars a week. But it was enough.

The work was hard for his middle-class body, and the life devoid of the outward decencies which he instinctively valued. But from the first he put away one dollar on every Saturday night. If his pay was small, so also were the prices of what he had to buy. Presently his son, inspired by the atmosphere of sound living, began selling papers

and added four dollars a week to the family income without neglecting school. Such were Carleton's beginnings as a capitalist. Very soon, with his trained mind and his knowledge of business, he saw the short cut to advancement. He learned the language of his fellow workers, studied their character and how to get most work out of them; and so he rose to be foreman. In a night school he mastered the trade of mason. When his savings amounted to a few hundred dollars, he put in his bid for a contract, and got it. From that day he was a capitalist employer, and when the narrative closed his business gave promise of becoming "big."

That is only half the story. His life and that of his wife and son were broader, freer, healthier and more truly cultivated than it had ever been in his respectably esthetic and sport-loving suburb. Instead of his country club there were public salt baths, the quasi-public gymnasium of the Y. M. C. A., and public playgrounds. Public night schools and summer schools furnished instruction in all the trades; philanthropic settlements and the like afforded lectures, books, chamber music, even drama and the opera. "Shakespeare and Beethoven, Maeterlinck and Mascagni" ceased to be reading club names and became living artistic personalities. In the crowded middle class, sickness had brought ruinous expense and had threatened the loss of position and salary. Here new work was to be had any day, and the charity hospitals gave bedding and food, and attendance of both doctor and nurse, which for all practical purposes were as good as money could buy. If babies came there was the public lying-in hospital. They came, and great was the joy thereof. Politics looms large in the life of the laboring man. With his knowledge of men and affairs, Carleton rose to be a leader in his district. And the necessary expense of his entire existence continued to be eight dollars a week.

To the superficial view it is, as the author intends, an inspiring narrative—a strong man's tonic; and as a description of actual conditions it is unimpeachable. Yet from the post-bellum point of view there is a blind-spot in its outlook, and a big one.

Carleton was not an immigrant, nor were his abilities merely those of the common laborer. In a few months he rose through strata in which most men spend a lifetime—

that of the Italian or Irish workman; that of the skilled American craftsman; that of the able and intelligent foreman; that of the petty contractor. His rise was the result of two facts, strangely and ironically contrasted. He was of middle-class stock with a middle-class character and a mind educated and trained to brain labor; and, being such, fate threw him in the way of privileges that are beyond the sphere of Americans born and bred but are lavished upon the ignorant alien. And the American author lauds this dispensation, pouring the vials of scorn upon the American middle class.

Who pays for the opportunities that the slums opened up to him? That is the crucial question. According to Carleton, it was "the independently well-to-do American class, who had partly made and partly inherited their fortunes"—philanthropic capitalists, in short. As ward politician he had begun to fall for the doctrines of the proletarian socialists; but his gratitude for these doles of charity "checked such wild thinking."

Could any thinking be as wild as that which centered Carleton's gratitude upon the capitalistic philanthropist, estimable though he may be? Only a small part of the benefactions to the poor are paid for by voluntary contribution. Public parks, play grounds and baths, night schools, trade schools and many hospitals, are supported by the city. The cost falls directly upon all who pay rent and taxes—largely upon the middle class.

But neither philanthropy nor taxes are the mainstay and support of this "America" of the slums. That lies in the relatively high wages that prevail there. Even before the war a high school education and a lifetime of brain labor brought Carleton less than he commanded as a bricklayer after a brief course in the night school. Today the disparity has been doubled and doubled again. The wrong goes far deeper than this. Manual labor is the chief item in the cost of any commodity. The well-known high cost of living is, for the most part, only high wages come home to roost. When wages are raised and raised again the capitalist survives by passing the buck to the consumer. To meet the increased prices, the wage earner has his increased wages. But middle class folk, who cannot pass the buck and whose salaries remain relatively stationary, are crushed lower and lower in the scale of living. In the

increased wages of manual labor, far more than in taxes, the middle class pays for the opportunities of those who were once called the poor. In escaping from the middle-class hell to the Utopia of the slums, in short, Carleton received freely the benefactions which he had always paid for and never before enjoyed.

Illogical, sardonic, preposterous as the predicament of the middle class has always been, it was rendered acute by the war—so acute that the publicist is beginning to take note of it, though not as a class phenomenon. In a war-time letter to the *New York Times*, Henry Fairfield Osborne described a typical instance, that of a trained scientist:

A man of very limited income, through years of close economy and saving, has finally gotten together enough money to buy a small piece of land and build a house on it—a home for his wife and children. This involved the assistance of a building and loan company and of the local banks; but after years of effort these loans have been paid off. Owing to the increased cost of living, his small professional income is entirely inadequate; he is now obliged to deprive himself and his family of some of the necessities of life. Now the state and city come in and put on his house, home and income a heavy tax, which amounts to more than one-tenth of his total income. This tax is partly used to give free education to aliens resident in his community. The money which these people should spend for the education of their children, under a system of enforced taxation for educational purposes, they are hoarding to send over to Europe. They are not obliged either to become citizens or to pay taxes, but the schools and all the other free advantages of the American system are wide open to them—free hospitals, free dispensaries, free day nurseries, free baths, free public lectures, free music—all of which they accept without giving any corresponding return to the community in which they live, or feeling any responsibility in its government.

Though Professor Osborne has “devoted the last quarter of a century to free education” he has come to believe that it “is greatly overdone” and urges that the laboring man be made to pay his share toward what he gets. The thing that is “gained without cost” is “accepted without gratitude.”

Note that though Professor Osborne starts out as a champion of the professional brain worker his only constructive idea has reference to people of the slums. He wants to make them “feel responsible” for the government—a government that deprives its oldest and best of the national largess in order to lavish it upon the immigrant day laborer. It is a responsibility which the immigrant might

shrewdly disclaim — and generally does disclaim, together with any possible notion of gratitude.

For us others the time has come when we can no longer disclaim responsibility — or, in fact, conceal our resentment. What then are the economic and social force lines which "Carleton" so grotesquely misconceived? What, in particular, is the situation as regards the old poor and the new? It is a wide field of inquiry, much neglected and overgrown with weeds of traditional fallacy and popular misconception. Yet the essential facts are fairly obvious, once they are stated.

In the modern world, it has been said, there are three great religions: Capitalism, Trade Unionism and Socialism. The epigram is rude, but it has a certain force. Not the least claim upon attention is the fact that it credits the middle class with no religion — not because they have no great, informing passion of the spirit, though that is the fact, but because as usual they are forgotten. Yet a brief survey of the other classes in their modern relations will suggest, perhaps, that a religion is soon to be born to the middle class, a greater religion which is the product of the other three.

Capitalism and trade unionism are natively American, sprung from our racial inheritance and spontaneously developed here. If we are unaware of their religious quality it is because they are instinctive, intimately pervading all our thought and all our living — a thing which our acknowledged religions conspicuously fail to do. Capitalism is, for the time being, on the defensive. It is not merely that labor is in the ascendant. The fiasco of the Interchurch World drive, together with the disturbing revelations of the Steel-Strike report, showed that capital has lost touch even with our ministers — whose own hard lives under the current régime have inclined them to that stripe of radicalism which champions the old poor. But let us not deceive ourselves! Capitalism is still our one great national religion, the thing that has led our country forward in so far as it has progressed.

Trade unionism is the religion of the skilled as opposed to the unskilled workman, the organized craftsman as opposed to the mainly unorganized day laborer. In its social outlook, and especially in its callous or unthinking conduct toward the middle class, it has been as self-cen-

tered and domineering as capital ever was. When the Allied cause was concretely put up to it, it proved, like capital, adequately patriotic—at its own price. Quite as much as capital, it prospered through the war. Yet it is probably less powerful and sound than a casual view might indicate. Time was when the trade unionist dreamed of the good of his craft, of unionism in general, for which he was willing to pour out his savings like water, to suffer hunger and bring deprivation upon those he loved. Then his “religion” was in its prime. But with some four millions of men enrolled or affiliated under the American Federation of Labor, mainly prosperous and advancing and with tens of millions of dollars in its treasuries, his fighting edge is dulled. He has much to lose in open war and much to gain by peace. Many or most of the strikes of 1919-20 were “outlaws,” called by radicals in defiance of the great Federation leaders. The steel strike was reluctantly authorized under pressure of the radical element and received support which was only half-hearted, in spite of Mr. Gompers’ fulminations. The railway Brotherhoods have been especially strong for peace and prosperity. There is a legend that the president of one of them started up in bed one night with beads of sweat on his brow—he had dreamed that his men had forced him to call a strike.

The truth is that the trade unionist is the stable aristocrat in the world of labor, having his own home and bank account and often wages that rise above the salaries of college professors—even of many State Governors. The Federation leaders rage against the “tyranny” of capital and shout that “the toilers” never, never, shall be slaves; but their actual deeds, and all their more measured utterances, show that they are guided, quite as much as the captain of industry is guided, by the prevailing economic theory. Both trade unionist and capitalist are true Americans whose daily prayer is for business as usual.

The trade unionist is equally menaced, moreover, by the rising tide of radicalism. The Federation originated among skilled workmen, who were organized along the lines of their separate trades—blacksmiths, foundrymen, machinists, etc.—and who held in common contempt the ignorant, unskilled workman; but it has of late witnessed the rise, and listened to the claim, of the new “industrial” type of union. This ignores all lines of trade or craft in

order to unite each industry as a unit — including with a minority of skilled workers the vast majority of the unskilled. When the Federation launched the steel strike it had to work through twenty-four different “international” unions, each of them having local units in the steel industry, and furthermore it had to organize the vast army of the unskilled. The lethargy, parsimony and jurisdictional bickerings of officers not directly interested in the steel workers were largely responsible for the failure of the strike. If the steel trade had been organized on the “industrial” plan, as a single autonomous unit, the strike would have paralysed the industry at a blow and would have been fought out under united leadership—and finances. Now the rank and file of industrial workers, who are generally ignorant and often foreigners, are putty in the hands of the able organizers of revolution—which is why Mr. Gompers and his lieutenants oppose the industrial type of union. Before the war many of these radical leaders—call them I. W. W.’s, Syndicalists, Bolshevists or National Guildsmen, as you will—became discouraged with the futility of their separate and rival movements and announced a policy of “boring from within” the Federation — which was already dangerously honeycombed with Socialism. If one can credit the purpose which they announced, as in W. Z. Foster’s *Syndicalism*, they intend to organize all basic industries on the new “democratic” plan, gain control of the fabulously rich treasuries of the Federation, and so work the great and final revolution of which they dream.

Thus a cycle of growth is closing. In its origin the Federation was a revolt against the unskilled workman — specifically the Knights of Labor, the sensational but momentary power of which was based upon the shifting sands of the laboring class as a whole. Today the unskilled, rapidly organizing by the units of industry and led by first-class fighting men, are threatening the old-time craftsmen of the Federation with a struggle for domination.

Every year is giving new evidence of their power. The steel strike, the soft coal strike, the New York port strikes and the outlaw railway strike of 1919-20 were technically failures; but they are not accounted failures by their leaders. Paradoxical as it may seem, these men find a greater profit in defeat than in victory — provided only that beneath each uprising there is a substantial grievance.

"Thank God," one of them exclaimed, "the strikes are coming thick — and unsuccessful!" The laborer who fights to redress a real grievance, suffers hunger and privation, and in the end creeps back to work defeated, is the prime material out of which revolutionists are made. When the time comes — if it does come — they may be relied upon to shut down basic industries, tie up public utilities, and so freeze us and starve us into doing their will. Nor is there lacking a programme for the revolutionary reconstruction of the nation. At the annual meeting of the Federation at Montreal in 1920, the radicals proposed a resolution in favor of the public ownership and "democratic operation" of the railways. Though the name of the Plumb Plan was not used, the principle is the same, deriving from English Guild Socialism — the latest and by far the most workable form which the Marxian doctrine has assumed. Incidentally it is, in general, the form of Socialism which the Bolsheviks profess as their end — the dictatorship of the proletariat being proclaimed as an unfortunate but necessary transition to the true "industrial democracy." At Montreal Mr. Gompers and his lieutenants fought the Guildsmen to the last ditch, but were overwhelmingly defeated.

All that separates us from the total reconstruction of our industrial and economic fabric, and of society as a whole, is the difference between declaring a programme and achieving it. The distance is not as wide as it may seem. Even if the inflammatory project of the borers from within should fail — and the decisive test is still to come — the dominant majority of the Federation are Guildsmen. In the great industrial unions the rank and file are of a dangerous type — men largely of a different race from the "old" North European immigration that brought us the founders of the Federation. They have very little sympathy with our instincts, and no true sense of our institutions — except as they feel the pinch of them. Yet under our democratic theory day laborers are our equals, and under our political practice they may outvote us, imposing upon us what we perforce must recognize as the sovereign will.

Against them are arrayed only two thoroughly class-conscious forces, old-school trade unionism and capitalism. And these, though their ideas and interests are essentially at one, have traditionally engaged in bitter warfare. Neither is able to break a general strike, nor could they do so if

they combined. They are equally powerless to command a majority at the polls. There are only two forces, that is unless a third force should join with them — the force of what we vaguely know as the middle class. In its lethargic and justly despised past it has been conservative voting, joining with capital and the old-school Federationist to maintain the established order. But it is no longer lethargic, nor safely to be despised. It is rapidly becoming class conscious — which is to say that, as between the radicals and the conservatives, it easily holds the balance of power. Potentially it is the greatest fighting force in the nation.

On which side will the middle class ultimately array itself? There are two divergent tendencies. Already the new poor are honeycombed with socialism and they are beginning to be organized on a trade union basis. Strong bodies of school teachers, musicians, actors are affiliated with the unions of manual laborers, and subject to the authority of the Federation leaders. Among college professors and ministers, the radical tendency is stronger than many of us realize — a radicalism that is blind to its own class interest. The Interchurch World report on the steel strike, though made by a committee including three Bishops, is a demonstrably partisan document, arraigning the Company for conditions which, though damaging enough, are only in part of its own making, and sophisticating or positively misrepresenting the radical aims of the strike leaders. Though these clergymen were engaged in a "drive" to relieve their own bitter poverty, they wrecked it by stepping aside for a partisan crusade in behalf of the old poor—most of whom have long received wages higher than the salaries of all but the most highly paid ministers.

The contrary tendency is that of the men who broke the coal strike in Kansas, the outlaw railway strike in the East. And with these we may ultimately find reason to include a quasi-middle-class element, also economically put upon by labor, the farmers. Instinctively these men realize that their own good, and the good of the nation, requires that they shall resist the threatened dominance of the radical. Decidedly, they are not of a mind to go down into the slums with Carleton in order to reclaim their own. They demand that life shall be made possible in the sphere to which they were born; they demand that it shall afford to them, to their children and to their children's children,

wholesome food and clothing, an inspiring social life and an education enabling them, when they are fit, to live onward and upward as their forefathers did. Are they not right? Is it not true that only thus can the character and brain force of the American people be continued? Instead of lavishing our resources upon the old poor, in the name of democratic equality, is it not wiser to grant a practical inequality and open up the opportunities of American life to those best able to give the nation an adequate return?

Is it a fact, either practically or theoretically, that all men are created equal? Ever since 1776 the question has been raised. John Fiske declared that no sound mentality was ever perplexed by it. But that was before we had extended its application from the loquacious forum of politics to the armed camp of industry, before the old immigration from the north of Europe had given way to the new immigration from the east and south. As applied to industry, the logical culmination of the doctrine of equality is, and can only be, Guild Socialism. All workmen would have an equal right to elect their foremen — and all others in authority up to those who control capital and invent new processes. Our incomparably efficient and productive corporations would be ruled, as our municipalities and our States and our national government are ruled, not by experts, free-handed and self-made, but by a party system and partisan leaders who hold their own intelligence and patriotic fervor firmly in leash while they prostrate their long and pliant ears to the ground. If our basic industries were as crudely conducted as our political state—think of it! That is the menace of Guild Socialism, and under the doctrine of industrial equality there is no other possible eventuality — unless, indeed, Guild Socialism should develop over night, as in Russia, into the most hideous of all tyrannies. Is it not time that we searched a little more diligently for whatever truth there may be — and falsehood—in the phrase of Jefferson?

In the century and a half since he declared a universal equality as the principle for which our forefathers were in rebellion, we have produced many men of the stamp of our first "philosopher statesman," but only one man who has rivaled Jefferson in scope and influence. The entire solution of our problem is contained, as the oak in the acorn, in a single sentence of Woodrow Wilson. In his campaign

of 1912, speaking of the problem of Chinese and Japanese immigration, he declared that he stood for the policy of exclusion. His reason was the familiar and conclusive reason, that the Oriental laborer can always, as Lafcadio Hearn expressed it, "underlive" the American, and so either fatally lower his economic and social standards or deprive him eventually of his birthright. "The success of free democratic institutions demands of our people education, intelligence and patriotism; and the State should protect them against unjust and impossible competition. Democracy rests upon the equality of the citizen."

The saying is stupendously, though perhaps unconsciously, significant. In order that men shall be economically and politically equal, they must be equal in fact. Those who are not equal in fact must be excluded from the country. *Democracy rests upon the equality of the citizen!* All men are created equal, in short, excepting only when they happen to be unequal. Following out the logic of the phrase, might we not discriminate against "unequal" men of any race or color, even excluding them from the franchise? Does the South need any other warrant for its treatment of the negro? In brief, we have another of those gigantically self-revealing phrases — which reveal a self so different from the one intended. A bright, new, shiny idea has been caught for a moment in the filmy mesh of a phrase — but escapes before it can be woven into the durable fabric of thought. John Fiske had a sense of humor; surely his ghost must be laughing — at himself and at one other.

Let us not be rudely hilarious. Every true American knows in his heart that there is a deep thought, a high aspiration, in our racial doctrine of equality. None the less, when it comes to a concrete predicament, whether of Chinese cheap labor or of social revolution, every true American, whatever the chaos of his thinking, feels as Woodrow Wilson felt. We cannot permit the ignorant alien, whose ways are not our ways and whose God is not our God, to underlive us and outvote us. Somewhere and somehow there is a principle above equality. Until we find out what it is, and how it is to be reconciled with the spirit of our republic, we shall have no defense of reason against those who with "Carleton" laud the abasement of true-born Americans in behalf of the old poor.

JOHN CORBIN.